



RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES - BREAKING THE BARRIERS TO POSTMODERNISM WITH REFERENCE TO GITHA HARIHARAN'S THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, Indian women novelists have played a significant role in reshaping and developing Indian English literature. These women writers have used their novels to explore the feminine subjectivity, portraying the stages of life from childhood to womanhood. Women writers from the Indian subcontinent have written prolifically and movingly of women negotiating and restricting the multiple patriarchies that determine and shape their lives in diverse post-colonial situations. They seek to posit the independent existence of women, focusing mainly on the identity crisis for women in a patriarchal society. Exploring a wide range of female experiences, the recent women writers depict both the diversity of women and diversity within each woman. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharan employs a postmodernistic lens to scrutinize the intricacies surrounding identity in present-day India. Through the use of multiple narratives and shifting perspectives, Hariharan challenges traditional notions of identity as fixed and stable. The novel portrays identity as a multi-faceted and ever-changing construct, influenced by various factors such as culture, gender, language, class and history. Let's analyse how Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a variety of female characters, mythological (idea), and real, with varied wishes and frustration, desires and agony, searching for self – identity or self – liberation.

Key words: patriarchy, liberation, identity, new woman.

The writing of women has been considered as a dominant medium of modernism and feminist proclamations. Women writers ponder on the recent burning issues concerned with women and also focus on the problems that have been prevailing in the society since long. Their discourses give a glance of the unexplored female psyche which has no accessibility. They also depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated women.

Human beings have a complex network of power relations and there are various models of submission and domination in this power struggle and inequality between women and men can appear in many different forms. Githa Hariharan, one of the most prolific woman writers of India and also a social activist, is known for her care and concern for women.

The storyline of *The Thousand Faces of Night* is rather traditional. Githa Hariharan plays with the binary images of 'good' and 'bad' women. She shows the struggle between tradition and

modernity. Githa tells us the story of five women – Devi, Sita, Pati, Parvatiamma and Mayamma. The patterns of lives of women in a Hindu cultural society can very well be perceived in *The Thousand Faces of Night*. There are other narratives of women linked with these women. The portrayal of mythological female characters like Sita, Amba, Gandhari, Ganga, Gauri in the novel is a testament to the enduring power and relevance of these archetypes. Plus all these, women are connected by their quest for identity, unhappy marriages and disgruntled ambitions. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, we are presented with a striking contrast between the stories of middle and working class women and the idealised mythological women. The mythological stories tend to cross-examine the intricate situations instead of suggesting a way out. The protagonist refuses to follow the preaching from mythologies blindly. She challenges the ‘moral’ of these stories and tries to decipher these ‘morals’ in a new light.

Devi, the protagonist, experiences an identity crisis even after following the norms framed by the society. She constantly faces the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, dilemma of cultures western versus eastern, dilemma of mind (knowledge) versus heart (true knowledge) and dilemma of being a ‘good girl’ versus ‘bad girl’. The crisis ‘to be or not to be a good girl’ haunts her and the pain of identity crisis reaches the required intensity through the use of myths. Devi plays multiple roles like, the role of (objectified) polished young charmer in the life of Dan, host and home-maker waiting for her husband Mahesh who comes home as a guest, and a muse for Gopal, the musician. She is not able to conform herself completely in any of these roles. Devi’s recognition of the individual identities of the men in her life highlights the need for understanding and respecting differences in personal identity within relationships. This notion of fused identity is especially prevalent for Indian women due to the prescribed roles and duties outlined in Hindu religious ideology. She becomes aware that men rule the world in a patriarchal society like India. She also finds that here, in India, females are raised with different expectations. When Devi comprehends this, she quickly comes out of it, to find her own identity and individuality.

Then the author explores Devi’s life after an arranged marriage. Mahesh, Devi’s husband takes her for granted. Devi is unable to get along in the new environment. She is unhappy, dissatisfied and lonely. Devi says,

‘This then is marriage, the end of ends; two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for life to begin, or to end and begin again. My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood.’ (TFN: 54).

Devi feels protected in the company of her father-in-law, who in turn, cultivates the ‘good girl syndrome’ in her and through the books of philosophy, he tells her how to become a virtuous wife. After he leaves for U.S., Devi listens to the stories of Mayamma-the housekeeper. She also observes and feels frustrated with the repression of women surrounding her. The ‘bad girl’ in her starts overpowering.

The novel portrays other women characters like Sita (her mother, who leaves her musical career to become an ideal daughter-in-law), Mayamma (her housemaid, who is unable to bear children and suffers cruelty and even after bearing a male child suffers exploitation until her son dies), and Gauri (her maid-servant who collects money for her marriage and then falls in love with her brother-in-law). Devi explores the myths and interrogates their relevance. She tries to find her own self. Her decision of not having kids, by not trying continuously and ‘hysterically’ to conceive, signifies her search for self. Inspired by her mother-in-law who left her husband’s house to lead a religious life, she also leaves her husband’s house with Gopal. Towards the end of the narrative, Devi realizes that all this while she has been trying to be a ‘good’ girl and has been trying to please society. Devi plays a role of the ‘other’ in the lives of three different men. She is frustrated in these roles that she has been playing. She finds that she, like all other women around her, has spent her life

in becoming the 'virtuous woman' or a 'good girl' or 'ideal woman' who never existed or who has grown obsolete with the passage of time. She realizes that she will not be able to do justice with herself if she continues to behave like a 'good girl' from the mythologies. She rebels. She decides that she will never fight with her own self anymore and would resolve the conflict in her. She decides that she should satisfy herself and not anybody else and then she does not have any fears in quelling all myths and becoming a 'bad girl'. She finally comes back to her mother to re-define her individuality.

Devi's mother Sita is also victimized. Married at the age of twenty, she goes to her in-law's house having a "resolve to be the perfect wife and daughter-in-law" (36). In order to maintain harmony and fulfill her endeavour to be a perfect wife and daughter-in-law, she has to pay a price; she sacrifices her love of playing veena. Once when her father-in-law sits in front of the gods, ready for his morning prayer, he is not able to find a thing he needs. He calls Sita who does not hear him, but from her room he hears the sound of the veena. He roars, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (30). This instance shows that in a male dominated society, a woman is recognized only in relation to others and her multifarious roles in the family. She is supposed to be an ideal wife, daughter-in-law, mother and home-maker. Her individual self has no recognition. Sita in frustrated fury burns all her photographs posed with her veena. This is done to avoid "obsolete memories" (104). After this, she becomes

"a dutiful daughter-in-law the neighbours praised" (30).

Traditionally, a "good woman" is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be chaste, faithful and virtuous like Sita and Savitri.

"For both men and women in Hindu society the ideal woman has been traditionally personified by Sita who is portrayed in the Ramayana, as the quintessence of wifely devotion" (Uma Chakravarti. 70).

A woman's identity and her perception of the self are seen in connection with others. This implies that a woman has to sacrifice her 'self' and avoid attainment of a distinct 'selfhood'. In the Indian culture, marriage is a sacred institution where the wife is the half of a man, Ardhagini, but ironically submits completely to the husband.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Sita's husband, Mahadevan is like a wooden character. His inability to create emotional ripples in Sita's heart results in her alienation from him. They seem to be two bulls yoked together to cover the tedious journey of their marital life. Most of time, women's 'self-sacrifice' retard their own self-development. Women have been so encouraged to concentrate on the emotions and reactions of others that they fail to express their own emotions.

Wifehood is considered as the main aim and every woman who marries is expected to aim at its excellence. Sita channels her frustrated musical talent into trying to shape the lives of her husband and daughter. It is the silent exposition of female power: She takes her husband by hand and leads him from promotion to promotion till he is within the exclusive circle of fast-rising executives who brings home three thousand a month. Correspondingly, Mayamma's story of suffering is not much different from the tales of women in general. Her suffering

"exemplify the inflexible constraints that identify a woman with the undesirable attributes of 'dependence', 'passivity' and 'masochism'" (Nair 77-78).

She suffers by a tyrant husband who hurts her. Conditioned strongly in her feminine role she attributes her sufferings to her fate and bears the physical and emotional violence at the hands of her mother-in-law in union with her son, stoically. To understand Mayamma's mother-in-law, one needs to dive deeper into the Indian ethos where the son is regarded as a refuge in the old age. The old woman is annoyed because Mayamma cannot produce children. Again, Mayamma's failure to weave an emotional bond with her husband threatens her desire for security. Mayamma's grandmother curses Mayamma for many things: the birth of a stillborn baby, the abandonment by her husband and the crushing poverty. However, Mayamma cannot offer resistance because traditionally, a bride is

not supposed to have a voice of her own. In a traditional society, those women can be happy who blindly and unthinkingly accept the roles it assigns them. As Kakkar says:

“The bride usually occupies one of the lowest rungs. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the elder woman of the family, especially those of her mother-in-law, are expected as a matter of course” (Kakkar 73-74).

She submits herself to the patriarchal values according to which women are “to be mere ‘dolls’ for men. Men mostly prefer doll-like girls who never ask question for any of their ideas or actions. Mayamma, the housekeeper at Mahesh’s house too suffers psychological and physical violence. Her husband hits, slaps, kicks, beats and indulges in non-consensual sexual activity. Unable to bear a child, her agony is enchanted by her indifferent husband who “woke her up every night, his large, hairy thighs and heavy on her, pushing, pushing” (80). Once she is reminded of a song, her mother used to sing, she hums the tune while making a ‘kolam’. Her husband like a tyrant on her bent bottom says,

“so you’ve taken to singing in the streets, have you, you shameless hussy” (TTFN. 111).

She remembers him as a cruel man. He snorts like an angry bull. Mayamma’s husband deserts her and frees her from his cruelty but his going away adds to her suffering because having run away from his responsibilities, he burdens her with the responsibility of looking after his mother, his son and support herself. After her son’s death, she seeks shelter at the home of Parvatamma, unable to forget her long bout of suffering.

Githa Hariharan exposes how women are expected to submit to certain archetypal images perpetuated by and glorified in televised serials, advertisements and print media. These notions, which constitute Indian womanhood, are reflected in prayers as well,

“Like Sati you must burn yourself to death, like Sati you must vindicate your husband’s honour and manhood....

Like Haimavati you must turn that black skin on your sinful body into a golden sheen of light and beauty.

Like Gauri you must reap the bountiful harvest that will be yours if you embrace the lingam on the sacrificial alter.” (TTFN, 94)

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Uma, Devi’s cousin, is also deserted after a year of her marriage, gravely ill-treated by her husband and molested by her father-in-law. She mutely resigns herself to her fate and leads a life devoid of happiness.

For an Indian woman, her role is circumscribed within the emotive immersion of herself, which results in the negation of self and often leads to exploitation and conflict. In the gallery of women characters portrayed in the novel, we encounter two sets of women, one which submits to the dominant discourse for validation and the second which favours the inner validation in search of a free self. The first set adopts the community’s charted path. Thus they are safer because they live in a fearful survival strategy. In the second case, it is because of the lack of social support and the resultant humiliation. Mayamma falls victim to the patriarchal pressures to survive. On the other hand, there are other women, like Devi, Sita who reject the hegemonic structure in their quest to be more than a mere housewife.

Githa Hariharan’s female characters revolt against the notion that marriage and motherhood are the eventual goals of an ‘ideal woman.’ They symbolize the present Indian women who are bringing about a silent revolution. Here, the characters stand up with the third wave of feminism powerfully advocating liberation of the individual. Through the study of women characters, Githa gives us a glance of the Indian tradition and culture and the position of women in the Indian society. It is about the journey of Indian women from tradition to modernity in search of self-identity. It also discusses the ways out. It tells us how the characters, mythological and modern cope with passive

victimhood. The issues which are voiced by Hariharan are social, cultural and ethical. Hariharan aims at empowerment of women.

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